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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how focus groups were used to assess the effectiveness of the University of Kentucky's Agricultural Information Center (AIC) in providing patron services. The AIC serves 1,100 undergraduate students, 370 graduate and postdoctoral students, and 1,700 faculty and staff in the College of Agriculture. In August 2000, the AIC conducted nine focus groups consisting of 36 faculty, staff, graduate students and postdoctoral students. The feedback shared by these focus group participants was instrumental in redefining both the immediate goals and the Five-Year Strategic Plan of the AIC. Immediate goals included creating an effective marketing plan, redesigning the library instruction seminars, and improving other public services offered. The data gained from the focus groups gave the AIC a clear picture of how these goals can best be achieved. The paper addresses the purpose of focus groups and the specific steps taken by the AIC at each of the following stages: (1) planning for focus groups, including goal setting, session locations and times, participants, focus group questions, and the moderator; (2) implementing focus groups, including the environment, moderator, participants, and data collection; and (3) analyzing focus group data. Future plans and ways that the resulting information from the focus groups has helped to improve public services are also discussed. (Contains 3 references and 11 suggested readings.) (MES)

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# Putting Knowledge to Work Effectively: Assessing Information Needs through Focus Groups

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To improve customer service, organizations require information about their users' needs and expectations. Focus groups can be easily implemented in any organization and allow clients to share knowledge about themselves which can be used to improve customer service. This paper describes how focus groups were used to assess the effectiveness of the University of Kentucky's Agricultural Information Center in providing patron services. It is hoped that the experiences described here will help other organizations gather data, assess performance and use the resulting information to improve customer service.

The University of Kentucky Agricultural Information Center (AIC) serves 1100 undergraduate students, 370 graduate and postdoctoral students, and 1700 faculty and staff in the College of Agriculture. In August 2000, the AIC conducted 9 focus groups consisting of 36 faculty, staff, graduate students and postdoctoral students. The feedback shared by these focus group participants was instrumental in redefining both the immediate goals and the Five-Year Strategic Plan of this service center. These immediate goals included creating an effective marketing plan, redesigning the library instruction seminars and improving other public services offered. The data gained from these focus groups gave the AIC a clear picture of how these goals can best be achieved. The focus groups provided more helpful information than any single evaluation tool used previously.

This paper will discuss the purpose of focus groups and describe the process of planning focus groups, implementing them, and analyzing the resulting data to improve customer service. To illustrate the process, the specific steps taken by the AIC will be described at each stage.

## PURPOSE OF FOCUS GROUPS

Krueger and Casey succinctly state the purpose of focus groups:

> "Focus groups have been found useful prior to, during, and after programs, events or experiences. They have been helpful in assessing needs, generating information for constructing questionnaires, developing plans, recruiting new clientele, finding out how customers make decisions to use or not use a product or service,

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testing new programs and ideas, improving existing programs, and evaluating outcomes." (Krueger and Casey 2000, 19)

All organizations should regularly assess the services and products they provide to help determine their future direction and identify areas requiring improvement. Focus groups are one of the many methods that can be used to collect the specific and detailed data necessary for this analysis. They can be effective tools for gathering information from both internal and external customers to assess specific services and overall performance of the organization. Unlike surveys, focus groups develop responses through synergy and group interactions. However, focus groups can be used to follow up on previous survey data or to identify topics for a large user survey.

## FOCUS GROUPS AT THE AIC

The University of Kentucky Agricultural Information Center went through a dramatic transformation, beginning in 1998. The majority of the monograph and serial collections moved to the new William T. Young Library building on campus. The AIC retained control of collection development and other major collection decisions. The resulting space was re-engineered and staff effort redirected to meet the growing technological demands of the students, faculty, staff and Kentucky citizens. This included placing a greater emphasis on providing electronic access to as many products and services as possible.

In 2000, the AIC's Public Service Librarian realized that an assessment of services was needed to help determine the direction of the many public services offered, especially the library instruction seminars for faculty, staff, graduate students and postdoctoral students. At the same time, the University Libraries were updating their Five Year Strategic Plan. The AIC personnel quickly determined that an analysis of all services offered would generate useful feedback for the strategic plan. The AIC had data from the biennial User Satisfaction Surveys conducted by the University Libraries, but decided they needed more specific information. In addition, the survey included only library users. The AIC identified focus groups as a better method for reaching their non-library users and to receive detailed responses from participants.

## PLANNING FOR FOCUS GROUPS

A significant amount of time was spent planning for the focus groups. This is in line with assessment research. In fact, Judy Sharken Simon recommends the following:

"Start planning at least four weeks ahead of the focus group session date. Six to eight weeks is probably more realistic. It takes time to identify your participants, develop and test the questions, locate a site, invite and follow up with participants, and gather materials for the sessions. You must have all the pieces in place if you are going to have a successful focus group." (Simon 1999, 40)

## Goals

Setting clearly-defined, reasonable goals was a crucial step since this created the framework for all future actions. The AIC set several goals. The main goal was to discover whether the AIC adequately met the information needs of the faculty, staff, graduate students and postdoctoral students in the College of Agriculture. Additional goals included:

- To determine the direction needed for the library instruction programs offered to these patron groups.
- To learn more about the information-seeking behavior of this these patron groups.
- To see if the AIC's strategic plan is in line with patrons' needs.

After clarifying these goals, they were communicated to the College of Agriculture and University Libraries in order to gain their support.

## Locations, Dates and Times

The AIC implemented its focus groups in accordance with the recommendations of Krueger and Casey:

> "Small focus groups, or mini-focus groups, with four to six participants are becoming increasingly popular because the smaller groups are easier to recruit and host, and they are more comfortable for participants.... Also, smaller groups are preferable when the participants have a great deal to share about the topic or have had intense or lengthy experiences with the topic of discussion." (Krueger and Casey 2000, 73-4)

The AIC decided to offer twelve possible sessions of four to six participants each within a two-week period. Although this was a demanding schedule for AIC staff, it was believed that the smaller groups would be more dynamic and generate more helpful data. Moreover, conducting all sessions within a short period of time ensured that the responses would be based on the same type of services and products. Sessions were scheduled for ninety minutes to allow time for introductions, discussion and summary statements. Two locations were used: both were familiar to most participants and provided ample parking. One location had teleconference capability for off-campus employees located in the two research stations.

## Participants

The type of participants (College of Agriculture faculty, staff, graduate students and postdoctoral students) was determined by the project goals listed above, but many questions still remained. What criteria would be used to choose participants, how would they be recruited and how could attendance be maximized? Krueger and Casey stress the importance of homogeneity and variety of focus group participants:

> "The focus group is characterized by homogeneity but with sufficient variation among participants to allow for contrasting opinions. By homogeneity, we mean

> participants have something in common that you are interested in .... There are at least two reasons we are concerned about homogeneity. One is for analysis purposes. The other is for the participants' comfort—the degree to which sharing will be influenced by differences in participants' characteristics." (Krueger and Casey 2000, 71-2)

It was clear from the literature, that homogeneity and variety were both necessary ingredients to maximize effectiveness. To achieve homogeneity, the AIC selected two sets of focus groups based on patron categories: one for faculty and staff and the other for graduate students and postdoctoral students. To address the need for variety, the AIC drew from all departments across the College of Agriculture. These decisions were especially important for the data analysis phase that would happen later. Conclusions drawn from the participants' responses could predict the information-seeking behavior of most patrons in each of the above categories since participants were not limited to a particular department. In addition, since all participants in a particular session were from the same patron category, this was expected to increase the group interaction and thereby stimulate the discussion. A small group format was deemed best to allow more time for in-depth discussions.

The next step was recruitment. Since both library users and non-library users were desired, the AIC decided to request lists of potential participants from Department Chairpersons within the college. Each Chairperson was asked to submit names of three employees and three graduate or postdoctoral students including both library users and non-library users. The selection was not truly random, but on the other hand was not chosen by library staff. The Public Services Librarian contacted each potential participant. She explained the purpose and process of the focus groups and asked for date and time preferences. Fortunately, most participants were accommodated in one of their first two preferences. More potential participants were invited than needed to allow for possible declines. Of the twelve possible sessions, nine were chosen by three or more participants each, and three sessions were cancelled.

## Questions

Simon aptly describes how focus group questions must be chosen to stimulate useful discussion and feedback:

> "The questions posed in a focus group are critical.... The sequence and tone of the questions are as significant as the questions themselves. To be effective, focus group questions should be open-ended, focused, and move from general to more specific.... a series [of questions] will move participants to a point where they feel comfortable discussing negative issues." (Simon 1999, 41-42)

The AIC based its questions (see Figure 1) on the goals set in the beginning. Six basic questions were asked in each session to allow plenty of time for responses and discussion among the groups. In addition, probing questions were sometimes used to generate more specific information as a follow-up question to a particular remark or to encourage more participation. The questions were open-ended and not leading to help eliminate possible bias due to expected

answers. The participants' comfort level was respected in the simplicity of the questions, the absence of library jargon and the avoidance of highly controversial issues. The same set of questions was given to all sessions to allow comparison of answers.

*Figure 1 - Questions*

1. What are your greatest information needs?
2. How do you usually find this information?
3. What types of information do you have trouble finding?
4. How has the AIC helped you?
5. Ideally, what services would satisfy your information needs?
6. What types of library instruction would be most helpful?

### Moderator

The pivotal role of the focus group moderator is well-described by Hernon and Altman:

> "The moderator conducts the session, explains the purpose of the session, helps participants to feel at ease and willing to contribute, asks the questions, and maintains the constant flow of the conversation. A good moderator, however, blends into the background and lets the dialogue develop among the participants.... The moderator does not become defensive if customers criticize library policies or services." (Hernon and Altman 1998, 141-2)

The Public Services Librarian served as the Moderator for all sessions. She had the appropriate facilitation training background, she was new to the AIC and therefore did not know most of the potential participants, and there were no funds to hire a professional facilitator or moderator. Although this was not ideal, it did work well since she was familiar with the desired goals, library products and services, and the overall library system. Given the small number of participants in each session and the previous experience with meeting facilitation, the Moderator also agreed to record all comments on flipcharts and on audiocassettes. This provided assurance to the participants that their comments were heard correctly.

## IMPLEMENTING FOCUS GROUPS

Hernon and Altman describe the importance of a friendly, informal setting which stimulates positive interaction:

> "The meeting area should be inviting, some refreshments provided, and participants given an opportunity to visit briefly and get acquainted, if they do not know one another. An informal setting may help the participants relax. Arranging the furniture so that participants face one another reinforces a positive, friendly atmosphere." (Hernon and Altman 1999, 141)

## Environment

Signs were strategically placed in both locations to give directions to anyone who might need extra assistance. The primary location for the focus group sessions had one table in the middle of the room with eight chairs arranged for optimum communication. The space was appropriately sized and shaped to provide good acoustics and a comfortable environment. The second location had several tables and was a bit large, but was chosen for its teleconference capabilities. Participation was open to all employees located in the two research stations (in Princeton and Quicksand, Kentucky). Unfortunately, no one from either site chose to participate remotely via the teleconference equipment. However, at least one employee did drive in. In both locations, participants were able to choose where they preferred to sit and by whom. Blank nametags were provided and self-service light refreshments (coffee, soft drinks, water, cookies, doughnuts and candy) were available throughout each session.

## Moderator

The Moderator plays an important role in keeping discussion on-track and insuring that all participants have an opportunity to express their views:

> "The facilitator [or moderator] should be able to deal tactfully with outspoken group members, keep the discussion on course, and make sure every participant is heard.... A facilitator must also head off arguments or public speeches about individual items and steer the group back on track." (Simon 1999, 42)

The Public Services Librarian, who served as Moderator and Recorder, welcomed all participants as they arrived. She encouraged each person to fill out a nametag with his or her preferred name for the session. It was important for participants to feel relaxed and comfortable so a few minutes of mingling was encouraged, as well as partaking in refreshments, before each session began. At the beginning of each session, the Moderator asked participants to introduce themselves, explained the purpose of the focus groups and how the data will be used, assured the participants of confidentiality and anonymity. The Moderator was aware of the importance of nonverbal communication, especially in these sessions. She made eye contact with everyone throughout each session. All participants were addressed equally using the names they had written on their nametags. The Moderator tried to foster the atmosphere of participant-led discussion as much as possible. Only when points needed to be clarified, particular persons needed to be encouraged to participate, or they needed to go on the next question did she retake control of the session.

## Participants

Attendance was excellent. Of those invited to participate, seventeen out of twenty-five graduate and postdoctoral students attended, and all nineteen faculty and staff attended. This yielded over eighty percent participation from seven different departments within the college, not counting the remote sites that chose not to participate. Part of the success may be due to the

strong support of Department Chairs for the focus groups, but quite a few attendees expressed curiosity about what the library had to offer and wanting to learn more. Each session had its own character and specific topics that were covered, even though the same questions were asked each time. All attendees participated fully in the discussions, with very little encouraging necessary. This may have been due in part to the ground rules (see Figure 2) set at the beginning of each session.

*Figure 2 – Ground Rules*

1. All ideas are important
2. Everyone should participate
3. Audio taping by permission only
4. All sessions end within 90 minutes.

## Data Collection

Data collection must be done carefully and with the full awareness of focus group participants:

> "Focus groups are typically recorded in two ways: by a tape recorder and with written notes. Written notes are essential .... [and] should be as complete as possible in case the tape recorder doesn't work.... Set up the tape-recording equipment and remote microphone before the meeting begins and in plain sight of participants." (Krueger and Casey 2000, 105)

The Moderator recorded all comments both in written form and by a tape recorder. The written comments were logged on a flipchart in plain view of everyone. Participants were encouraged to speak up if the Moderator logged their responses incorrectly. The Moderator asked permission before shortening or otherwise changing any wording from the actual comments. Typical facilitation techniques were employed including use of multiple appropriate ink colors, questions preprinted on each page and adequate space provided to encourage maximum feedback. The tape recorder was set up ahead of time, but the microphone was located in the middle of the table for everyone to see. Permission to use the tape recorder was requested after the introductions were made and the purpose was explained. All sessions were taped. These tape recordings were heard only by the Moderator and used for clarification purposes if a written response was not clear.

## ANALYZING FOCUS GROUP DATA

It is important that focus group data be analyzed systematically, and preferably by someone who was present during the focus group discussion:

> "Focus group analysis is a deliberate, purposeful process. It is systematic, uses verifiable procedures, is done in a sequential manner, and is a continuing process." (Krueger and Casey 2000, 141)

> "We highly encourage that analysis be done by someone who was physically present in the room when the focus group was conducted. It's been estimated that 80% of the content is found in the transcript, and the remaining 20% are all the other things that occur in the room. In some groups, the environment must be sensed and felt." (Krueger and Casey 2000, 139)

After the focus group sessions concluded, the Moderator listened to each of the tape recordings and edited the flipchart notations as needed. All of the data was typed into a word processing document by a Student Assistant. All of the replies were grouped together by question. Different types of bullets were used to indicate which session each comment came from, and a "F/S" (Faculty/Staff) or "GS" (Graduate Student) was used to note the user group. After basic analysis of the data, six major topics emerged: collections, communication, electronic access, facilities, library instruction and library services. The data was transferred to a spreadsheet and rearranged into each of these major categories, retaining both the session and user group designations. Additional columns included the number of the question that elicited the response, what the AIC was already doing, recent improvements that have occurred since the focus groups were held, and the next steps needed to address the concerns raised.

The Moderator was able to determine that the AIC needed to promote more of its services and products already offered, continue moving in its current direction of enhancing electronic access to many of its products and patron services, and explore some new areas not yet offered. Most of the information was welcome news and fell in line with the strategic plan. Some of the suggestions for exploration had never been considered before, such as creating a software technology webpage that listed various types of software training available all over campus as well as links to tutorials and university licensing information.

In all, the data has been very informative and helpful in understanding the information needs of these user groups. The volume of data, however, was much more than expected due to the high response rates to the questions. The AIC personnel continue to work on addressing the issues raised and to incorporate the new ideas into the current strategic plan. In particular, marketing patron services and products has become a major priority, new seminars targeting information needs identified by both user groups will be offered this year and our website has undergone several enhancements to provide the types of information requested by the focus group participants (see Figure 3).

## FUTURE PLANS

The AIC's focus group experience was so successful that the AIC plans to use this assessment tool on a regular basis. For very little cost, (less than $100 for refreshments and supplies), the library was able to gain a large amount of valuable information that has been quite helpful in evaluating the information needs of two large user groups and providing feedback on our current services and resources. Future plans may include electronic surveys, online focus groups and offsite focus groups for off-campus user groups. Information needs of other patron groups, such as undergraduate students and internal customers, also need to be assessed. A slight

increase in the number of participants per session would also be helpful. A longer recruitment period and follow-up reminders sent immediately prior to the sessions are possible ways to achieve this. Additionally, future focus group participants should receive a timely follow-up report in addition to the thank-you letter.

## PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK

In conclusion, the resulting information from the focus groups has helped improve public service in many ways (see Figure 3).

*Figure 3 - Resulting Actions*

- Scheduled email message highlighting new and enhanced services and products with archive webpage of past messages
- Placed New Materials list on website and advertised via email
- Updated Reference Tools webpage
- Added more electronic journals, including more JSTOR titles
- Improved access to several databases, including dedupping in AGRICOLA
- Created Virtual Biology Library website
- Expanded webpage on proxy access instructions
- Enhanced training webpage including links to other training offered on campus
- Redesigned seminar series for faculty, staff, graduate students and doctoral students
- Initiated new In-Service workshops for cooperative extension personnel
- Offered circulation of Microsoft Office software licensed by the university
- Added more direct links to articles from databases
- Expanded journals holdings information in library catalog
- Presented information to Department Chairs about library services and resources
- Designed a new training room available for university groups
- Provided links to database tip sheets on website
- Improved copy card service

The focus groups provided a wealth of detailed ideas for the AIC to explore. They are an excellent example of using the knowledge that patrons have to assess and improve the services and resources offered by an organization, and have enabled the AIC to respond directly to user needs and desires.

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